

Strategic Insight

NORTHCOM to Coordinate DoD Role in Homeland Defense

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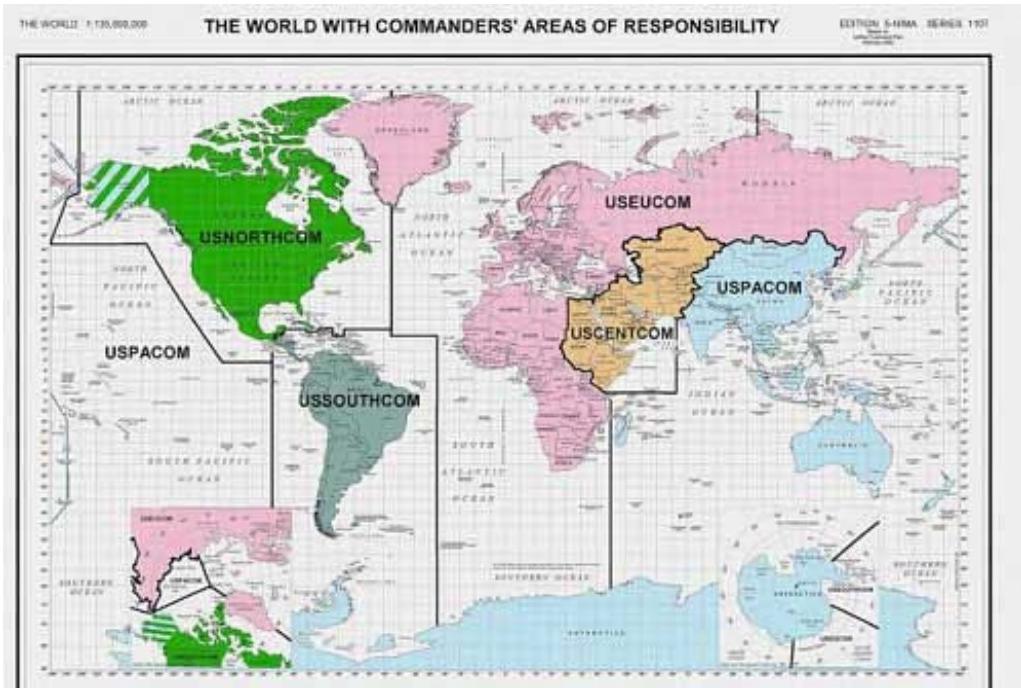
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On April 17, 2002, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld announced the formation of the Northern Command, or NorthCom, to assume responsibility for defense of the land, sea and air of the continental United States -- the first time CONUS has been assigned to a unified combatant commander. NorthCom, which is slated to become operational in October 2002, will exercise command over all forces that operate within the United States in response to external threats and in support of civil authorities.[\[1\]](#) The announcement marks only the beginning of DoD's efforts to organize itself for the mission of supporting homeland defense -- a critical new mission for the department as identified in the Quadrennial Defense Review.

Secretary Rumsfeld stated that NorthCom will "...help the department better deal with natural disasters, attacks on U.S. soil, or other civil difficulties. It will provide for a more coordinated military support to civil authorities such as FBI, FEMA and state and local governments."

The creation of NorthCom came as part of a broader review of the Unified Command Plan in which several other changes were announced affecting the roles and responsibilities of the nine regional and functional commands. Under the new plan, NorthCom assumes responsibilities for homeland defense instead of the Joint Forces Command, and the European Command assumes responsibility for Russia and nations in the Caspian, which had previously been handled directly out of the Pentagon. Joint Forces Command will cease its geographic areas of responsibility and focus on "transformational" activities, described by Secretary Rumsfeld as "...experimentation; innovation; improving interoperability; reviewing, validating and writing joint doctrines; preparing battle-ready joint forces and coordinating joint training simulations and modeling."[\[2\]](#) The breakdown of regional command responsibilities is shown in the map below.

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Source: Department of Defense

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The NorthCom commander will also serve as the Commander of the North American Aerospace Defense Command, or NORAD. The NorthCom geographic area of coverage will consist of the continental United States and Alaska, Canada, Mexico and parts of the Caribbean and waters out to a minimum of 500 miles. In terms of missions, NorthCom combine the NORAD mission with that of the Joint Task Force for Civil Support in the Joint Forces Command. This task force provides support to civil authorities for chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear and major conventional explosives events. NORAD will continue to control the air defense mission as it relates to CONUS defense.

NorthCom Challenges and Issues

The new Command faces myriad challenges as it ramps up to begin operations in the Fall. Among the difficulties:

- **Identifying Forces:** NorthCom will need to identify operational requirements for its mission and find active duty forces to meet those requirements on an ongoing basis. This could mean more missions for a force structure that is already arguably overburdened around the world.
- **Developing Command Relationships:** Building a unified command structure for homeland defense missions addresses a critical shortfall in DoD's organization. However, there are difficult tasks ahead in developing an internal command relationship within DoD's structure that will allow it to function effectively to meet the needs of actual CONUS defense as well as the requirement to support civilian authorities. These are different missions that could generate different command requirements. For example, combatant commanders in the geographic theaters have an established procedure for requesting forces to perform specific missions -- a procedure that requires them to request forces through the Joint Staff with supporting justification. In situations, where, for example, the NorthCom Commander wants additional maritime assets in response to a specific threat, he will need to process a request for forces from the Joint Forces Command via the Joint Staff and a determination will need to be made on which organization will exercise operational control. NorthCom's task in providing support to civilian authorities presents a different challenge. This situation will be somewhat more complicated than a direct request for operational forces, since any request for support from NorthCom may in fact be forwarded to DoD

from either state or federal civilian agencies, which will entail NorthCom then in turn requesting forces through its chain. This could result in an unwieldy bureaucratic process in situations requiring quick response.

- **Role of the National Guard:** The visible presence of National Guard troops at our airports is a poignant reminder of the important role that the Guard plays in homeland defense in support of civilian and federal authorities. The Guard is presently organized and structured to support DoD's overseas missions, and Guard units are filling many vital missions around the world. Indeed, much of nation's military "tail" in the "teeth to tail" ratio resides in the Guard. The NorthCom commander will need to address his own command relationship with the Guard and, more generally, the role that Guard can and should play in homeland defense.

Conclusions

Organizing the Executive Branch and, more broadly, the federal government, to ensure that the 48-odd organizations that have a role in homeland defense can interact in a synergistic way will take time. The Bush Administration is committed to revolutionizing the way the nation addresses homeland defense, and, like all revolutions, change can be halting and painful and dramatic all at the same time. We are well advised to give those who are developing the policies, organizations and procedures to address this mission some latitude as they break new ground and knock over some rice bowls. Once this process is complete, then our governmental system will function, as it should -- and the nation will develop a consensus on the best way forward.

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References

- [1] See [Special Briefing on the Unified Command Plan, April 17, 2002](#).
- [2] Ibid.